

# William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod"

A Life



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Cover image: William Strang, William Sharp (c. 1897), etching, printed by David Strang. Photograph by William F. Halloran of author's copy (2019).

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# Chapter Three

1885–1886

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Sharp remained healthy for most of 1885 and became more productive. He continued as London art critic for the *Glasgow Herald*, joined the staff of the *Academy*, and contributed articles to the *Art Journal*, the *Examiner*, the *Athenaeum*, and *Good Words*. He hoped a year or two of reviewing and editing would free him financially to concentrate on poetry and fiction. He wrote to Eugene Lee-Hamilton in early January to praise his recently published book of poems, *Apollo and Marsyas, and Other Poems*. In a separate letter to Violet Paget, Lee-Hamilton's half sister who published as Vernon Lee, he expressed his disappointment in her recent novel, *Miss Brown*, which portrayed some of Sharp's friends in a negative light: "You cannot be aware of the deep offense it has given to many good friends. [...] If I had never read anything else of yours, 'Miss Brown' would effectually have prevented my ever reading or having the faintest curiosity to read anything from your pen." Then he tempered those harsh words:

If it were not for my sincere admiration for you as a writer of much delightful, admirable, and original work — I should not have written to you as I have now done: but it is because of my admiration for the "Vernon Lee" whom I know that I refuse to recognize as genuine or characteristic a production in every sense inferior to anything she has done.

The severe criticism may have derived in part from Paget's negative response to Sharp's "Motherhood," parts of which Elizabeth read to her when she visited Italy in 1881. Yet Sharp's opinion of the novel reflected that of many others, including Henry James to whom she had dedicated the novel, and she came to regret her authorship. Though Sharp's

relationship with Vernon Lee soured temporarily, that with Eugene Lee-Hamilton remained strong. Following the death of their mother in 1896, Lee-Hamilton found himself able to leave the reclining chair he had lain in for years, travel to America, and marry in 1898 the Anglo-Jamaican novelist Annie E. Holdsworth. Though Lee-Hamilton's health remained precarious, he with his wife and half-sister continued for several years to host British writers, Sharp among them, at their Villa Il Palmerino outside Florence.

When he wrote the letters to Lee-Hamilton and Violet Paget, Sharp was in bed with an illness that made him liable to his "old trouble" which we now know was rheumatic fever and which he defined as a rheumatic chill that "rather floored him." By February he had recovered enough to write a review of Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* that appeared as the lead item in the 28 February issue of the *Athenaeum* (271–273). *Athenaeum* reviews were unsigned, but Sharp sent a copy to Pater who thanked him on March 1: "You seem to have struck a note of criticism not merely pleasant but judicious; and there are one or two points — literary ones — on which you have said precisely what I should have wished and thought it important for me to have said. Thank you sincerely for your friendly work!" He was pleased that Mrs. Sharp was also interested in the book as it was always a sign to him that he had to some extent succeeded in his literary work when it gained the "the approval of accomplished women." He hoped Sharp would contact him a week or so ahead of a projected visit to Oxford so they could plan to see as much as possible of each other (*Memoir*, 104–105).

Sharp first met Pater through Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the late 1870s, and their friendship was such by November 1882 that Pater began a letter to Sharp with a parenthetical: "(I think we have known each other long enough to drop the 'Mr.:')." In 1884, Sharp dedicated his second book of poems, *Earth's Voices: Transcripts from Nature: Sospitira and other Poems*, as follows: "Dedicated in High Esteem and in Personal Regard to my Friend, Walter Pater, Fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford." Sometime in the late spring of 1885, the Sharps went "down to Oxford," according to Elizabeth, so she could "meet the Misses Pater at their brother's house" (*Memoir*, 119–120). While staying there, Sharp saw an advertisement for "a desirable cottage to be let furnished, with service, and garden stocked with vegetables" on Loch Tarbert in Scotland, and they rented it for July.

The cottage turned out to be less desirable than advertised, but Sharp described its location glowingly in a July 22 letter to Edward Dowden:

I came here from London some weeks ago, with my wife and a young sister who lives in Glasgow. I forget, by the by, whether I ever told you that I was married late last autumn? I am always glad to get north, both loving and knowing the Western Isles and Highlands, and all places wherever broods the Celtic glamour. West Loch Tarbert is one of the loveliest of the Atlantic sea-lochs: severing Knapdale (Northern Argyll) from “wild Cantyre;” its length is about 11 miles, from its commencement east of the islands of Giglia and Islay up to the narrow Isthmus of Tarbert on the western side of Loch Fyne. From our windows we get a lovely view up the loch, looking out on the mountainous district of Knapdale and the small-islanded water towards Tarbert. To the North-east is Shobli-Ghoil — the Hill of Love — the mountain where that Celtic Achilles, Diarmid, met his death by a wound in the heel through the envy of Fingal. Behind us are endless moorlands, and only one or two cottages at wide distances.

Foreshadowing more overtly his writing as Fiona Macleod, he continued: “I have a stirring and heroic Celtic subject in my mind for poetic treatment and hope to make a start with it ere long. It will be with regret that we will leave at the end of the month — but we have two or three other places to go to in Scotland before returning to London — which we do not intend doing till the end of September.” The purpose of the letter was to ask for Dowden’s opinions about the placing of several sonnets in an edition of Shakespeare’s poems he was working on for inclusion in the *Canterbury Poets*, a series of inexpensive editions of the works of well-known English poets that was to be issued by the Walter Scott Publishing House. After publishing *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* in 1875, Dowden, a Professor at Trinity College in Dublin, became a leading expert on Shakespeare, and Sharp valued his opinions.

The care Sharp exercised in arranging the poems and writing the Introduction for *Songs, Poems, and Sonnets of William Shakespeare* in the fall of 1885 led the Walter Scott Publishing House to accept his proposal for a book containing a selection of the best sonnets of the century and to appoint him, in 1886, general editor of the *Canterbury Poets*. The firm played a crucial role in establishing Sharp’s reputation as a writer and editor. Walter Scott was a prosperous businessman in Newcastle who acquired the bankrupt Tyne Publishing Company in 1882. He



Fig. 5 Photograph of Edward Dowden Robinson (c. 1895), Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait\\_of\\_Edward\\_Dowden.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_Edward_Dowden.jpg), Public Domain.

named David Gordon, a dynamic Scotsman, as manager of the renamed Walter Scott Publishing House. Gordon convinced Scott he could turn the firm to profitability by speeding up the publication of inexpensive editions of major writers, separating them into several series, advertising them aggressively, and selling them for one shilling at the rate of one per month to an expanding reading public. After buying and reading one volume, readers would be motivated to acquire another. Gordon proceeded to create in short order not only the Canterbury Poets Series, but also the Camelot Classics Series (for prose works), the Great Writers Series (biographies), and the Contemporary Science Series.

Gordon turned first to Joseph Skipsey (1832–1903), who was living in Newcastle, to edit the Canterbury Poets. Son of a coal miner, Skipsey taught himself to read and matured into a well-known and highly respected poet. Under his editorship, in 1884 and 1885 the firm

produced editions of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Blake, Robert Burns, and Edgar Allan Poe (all edited by Skipsey), George Herbert (edited by Ernest Rhys), and Sharp's edition of Shakespeare's poems. Scott and Gordon knew little about English or any other literature; they were businessmen intent on making money. In his autobiographical *Wales England Wed*, Ernest Rhys recalled receiving in early 1886 "an unexpected call at his London home from 'two prosperous-looking men in top hats' who turned out to be Walter Scott's representatives." They were there to offer Rhys the editorship of a prose series complementing the Canterbury Poets. Rhys gradually realized the two men thought they were talking to Professor John Rhys, a well-known Celtic scholar. Nevertheless, Ernest got the job, and he described the visit more fully in *Everyman Remembers* (75–76):

One morning two visitors were announced at an awkwardly early hour. [...] A loud knocking woke me in no state to receive strangers, clad in an old Rob Roy dressing-gown and slippers. It was too late to retreat. One of the callers, a red-haired Scotsman, was already entering. [...] These morning callers were emissaries of Walter Scott Ltd. [...] they carted me off to lunch at a City tavern and asked me to edit a prose series for a ridiculously modest stipend. Before we parted, I had sketched a chart of a dozen possible titles. So lightly was I launched on the career of editing.

After accepting the offer from the emissaries, one of whom must have been David Gordon, Rhys chose Camelot as the name of the new series, and settled on Sir Thomas Malory, "the father of English prose," for its first volume, which he edited under the title *Romance of King Arthur*. The Camelot Series was a remarkable success, as were the other three series. The volumes disappeared as fast as the Scott firm and its editors could produce them. When the Camelot Series ran its course, Ernest Rhys convinced an unknown publisher, J. M. Dent, to undertake another series of inexpensive editions of higher quality, which became the phenomenally successful Everyman's Library. Dent, its publisher, made vast sums of money, and Rhys, its first and long-time editor, became famous as "Everyman."

Shortly after returning to London in the fall of 1885, Sharp health gave way again. "Disquieting rheumatic symptoms" according to Elizabeth, but he was able to work on various writing and editing projects, chief among them an anthology of nineteenth-century

sonnets for the Canterbury Poets Series. He asked many well-known poets for permission to use one or two of their works and composed the volume's introductory essay — "The Sonnet: Its History and Characteristics" — which George Meredith considered "the best exposition of the sonnet known to him" (*Memoir*, 116). Elizabeth contributed to the selection and arrangement of the poems. By late December, the volume was ready, and it was published on January 26, 1886. It sold well and was reissued several times during the year. Sharp made some revisions during the summer and fall of 1886 for a new edition in December. The anthology went through several more editions and became, after 1899, *Sonnets of the Nineteenth Century*. Though Sharp was hired by the Scott firm to prepare the book and later to revise it, he did not share in its long-term financial success, but he told Edward Dowden (February 3, 1886) the publishers had "behaved very decently" to him. No matter how decent their behavior, it paled in contrast to what Sharp would have earned had he received royalties, and that income would have eased the financial difficulties the Sharps endured for many years. Though Sharp's earnings from the volume were meager, it established his reputation as an editor.

Sharp also managed to write in the fall of 1885 a three-volume sensational novel set in Scotland and Australia called *The Sport of Chance* which was published serially in *The People's Friend* in early 1887 and as a book by Hurst and Blackett in 1888. He also began planning a biography of Shelley for Walter Scott's Great Writers Series, which was edited by his friend Eric Robertson. For this series, Sharp eventually produced, in addition to the Shelley (1887), biographies of Heinrich Heine (1888) and Robert Browning (1890). Despite his frequent illnesses in the fall of 1885, he wrote the introduction and edited for the Canterbury Poets' *Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*, a Walter Scott who differed significantly from the book's publisher.

When Sharp learned the Scott firm was planning a Camelot prose series with Ernest Rhys as General Editor, he saw an opportunity to make some additional money. He asked a mutual friend for an introduction to Rhys and sought him out with a proposal to edit and introduce Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*. According to Rhys, Sharp "burst in" on him "one summer morning" as he was "having a bath." Rhys described their meeting in *Everyman Remembers* (76):



This was William Sharp, the poet, who towered up, a rosy giant, in the low-raftered room. His fine figure and exuberant contours, set forth in unusually resplendent clothes, suggested a stage Norseman. He talked very fast and excitedly, his bright yellow hair brushed up from an open brow, under which blue eyes, rosy cheeks, full red lips, and a pointed yellow beard suggested a picture by some impressionist painter. He had been editing the *Canterbury Poets*, in which series my George Herbert volume appeared, and had heard from the publishers of my prose argosy. Here was an opening after his own heart. In half an hour he had proposed half a dozen books which he would like to edit for me, and De Quincey's *Opium-Eater* was there and then allotted to him.

He described this meeting earlier and at greater length in a 1907 *Century Magazine* article. Sharp was

joyously and consciously exuberant. He told of adventures in Australian backwoods, and of intrigues in Italy; [...] and then he turned, with the same rapid flow of brief staccato sentences, to speak of his friend Mr. Swinburne's new volume of poems, or of the last time he walked along Cheyne Walk [where Rhys then lived] to spend an evening with Rossetti. He appeared to know everybody, to have been everywhere. [...] It is not easy to avoid extravagance in speaking of one who was in all things an illusionist. Sharp's sensations, artistic ideas, and performances were not to be counted by rule or measure. He was capable of predicting a new religion as he paced the Thames Embankment, or of devising an imaginary new theater for romantic drama — whose plays were yet to be written (by himself) — as he rode home from the Haymarket.

And again:

Thanks to his large and imposing presence, his sanguine air, his rosy faith in himself, he had a way of overwhelming editors that was beyond anything, I believe, ever heard of in London, before or since. On one occasion he went into a publisher's office and gave so alluring an account of a long-meditated book that the publisher gave him a check for 100£, although he had not written a word.

Those descriptions capture better than any others the appearance and mannerisms that made Sharp appealing — to women and to men — as he was making his way in the London publishing world in the 1880s.

Elizabeth recalled the start of 1886 as “unpropitious.” It was a wet winter, and Sharp was ill and dejected. In mid-February, he sent two

sonnets to his friend Eric Robertson for his birthday. One begins with following sestet:

A little thing it is indeed to die:  
 God's seal to sanctify the soul's advance —  
 Or silence, and a long enfevered trance.  
 But no slight thing is it — ere the last sigh  
 Leaves the tired heart, ere calm and passively  
 The worn face reverent grows, fades the dim glance —  
 To pass away and pay no recompense  
 To Life, who hath given to us so gloriously.

In a letter accompanying the sonnets, Sharp wrote, "There are two 'William Sharps' — one of them unhappy and bitter enough at heart, God knows — though he seldom shows it. This other poor devil also sends you a greeting of his own kind [the sonnet]." From childhood on, Sharp assumed to an unusual extent the guise of different people. Gradually the trait progressed to his portraying himself two people inhabiting a single body. This letter is one of the early signs of the movement toward duality. Here the duality is defined by mood; one William Sharp is happy and outgoing, the other unhappy and bitter. The notion of two people in one body was a means of explaining and coping with the intense mood swings that plagued him throughout his life. Gradually he came to define the duality as the dominance of reason and the dominance of emotion, as living in the material world and the spirit world, and finally as being both a man and a woman. That trend finally culminated in the creation of a fully functional second self in the form of the woman he called Fiona Macleod.

Of the *Opium-Eater* assignment, Rhys wrote: "But alas! before he [Sharp] had completed the copy or even written his preamble for the book, he came down with scarlet fever. Careless of infection, I spent an hour at his bedside when the fever abated, in talking over De Quincey, and then wrote the preamble myself over his name" (*Everyman Remembers*, 77). Since the volume appeared on March 26, 1886, Sharp must have been ill with scarlet fever in February, not long after his first meeting with Rhys. "In the early spring of 1886," Elizabeth wrote, "my husband was laid low with scarlet fever and phlebitis. Recovery was slow, and at the press review of the Royal Academy he caught a severe chill; the next day he was in the grip of a prolonged attack of rheumatic

fever" (*Memoir*, 125–126). The catalogue of Sharp's colds and bouts of rheumatic fever in the nineteen eighties is extensive:

1. In January 1880 a bad cold while visiting Rossetti;
2. In summer and fall 1880, another cold culminating in his initial bout of rheumatic fever;
3. In fall 1883 a second attack of rheumatic fever which seriously damaged a heart valve and drew his sister Mary from Edinburgh to help Elizabeth nurse him back to health;
4. In June 1884 another cold that threatened to produce another episode of rheumatic fever, which Sharp described in a pitiful letter to Hall Caine in a hand so cold and shaky the writing is nearly illegible;
5. In fall 1885, disquieting rheumatic symptoms;
6. In February 1886 scarlet fever and another attack of rheumatic fever.

This record of illnesses contrasts markedly with the robust figure who appeared to Rhys. Sharp described the dichotomy in a letter to Caine in November 1883: "I am one day in exuberant health and the next very much the reverse."

The rheumatic fever attack in the spring of 1886 was particularly severe. "For many days, Elizabeth wrote, "his life hung in the balance." Her description of his hallucinations during the illness is especially compelling as it bears upon how his imagination worked and his later creation of the Fiona Macleod persona:

During much of the suffering and tedium of those long weeks the sick man passed in a dream-world of his own; for he had the power at times of getting out of or beyond his normal consciousness at will. At first, he imagined himself the owner of a gypsy travelling van, in which he wandered over the to him well-known and much-loved solitudes of Argyll, resting where the whim dictated and visiting his many fisher and shepherd friends. Later, during the long crisis of the illness, though unconscious often of all material surroundings, he passed through other keen inner phases of consciousness, through psychic and dream experiences that afterward to some extent were woven into the Fiona Macleod writings, and, as he believed, were among the original shaping influences that produced them. For a time, he felt himself to be practically

dead to the material world and acutely alive "on the other side of things" in the greater freer universe. He had no desire to return, and he rejoiced in his freedom and greater powers; but as he described it afterward, a hand suddenly restrained him: "Not yet, you must return."

He believed he had been "freshly sensitized," Elizabeth continued, he "knew he had — as I had always believed — some special work to do before he could again go free." While his illness persisted, Ernest Rhys brought him branches of a tree in early leaf, which Elizabeth placed on the windowsill. The effect of their "fluttering leaves," she wrote, helped his imagination. But they had another effect: They "awoke 'that dazzle in the brain,' as he always described the process which led him over the borderland of the physical into the 'gardens' of psychic consciousness he called 'the Green Life'."

Here Elizabeth broached the psychic experiments — enhanced by drugs — Sharp undertook in the 1890s. She discouraged those experiments because they negatively affected his overall mental health. She worried they might drive him into a state of schizophrenia from which he could not recover. Such experiments led him in the nineties into the orbit of William Butler Yeats, who enlisted both Sharp and Fiona Macleod in his efforts to obtain by psychic experiments the rituals of the Celtic Mystical Order he planned to house in an abandoned castle in the west of Ireland. Many years later Yeats recounted a story Sharp told him and commented "I did not believe him, and not because I thought the story impossible, for I knew he had a susceptibility beyond that of anyone I had ever known to symbolic or telepathic influence, but because he never told anything that was true; the facts of life disturbed him and were forgotten" (*Autobiographies*, 340).

After recovering from the worst of the 1886-episode, Sharp was unable for many months to engage in sustained writing, and that left him desperately short of money. "At the end of ten weeks," Elizabeth wrote, "he left his bed. As soon as possible I took him to Northbrook, Micheldever [in Hampshire], the country house of our kind friends Mr. and Mrs. Henryson Caird, who put it at our disposal for six weeks. Slowly his strength came back in those warm summer days, as he lay contentedly in the sunshine" (*Memoir*, 126). From Micheldever on August 14, he described his condition to Theodore Watts, who was helping him with the second edition of *Sonnets of this Century*:

I am gaining strength very satisfactorily. My doctor ran down to see me before going off to Canada on his autumn holiday, and he told me he could now find no trace of heart-disease, though I undoubtedly inherited from the Rheumatic fevers (the recent attack & that of 5 years ago) a heart-complaint which would require my care for a year or so to come. I am not to work too hard, and never after the afternoon. This is all very well, but whether I can keep to such orders is a different matter.

In a September 7 letter to Frederick Shields, he said he was “progressing slowly but steadily.” In a September 13<sup>th</sup> letter, he told Ford Madox Brown he was “nearly robust again.” He had benefited from “his extended stay at this pleasant country house.” He had begun to do a little work, “chiefly reviewing,” but he had been instructed “to wait another month at least before getting in full sail again.” He had hoped to be able to go to Manchester to see and review the frescoes Brown was painting for the Great Room of the newly constructed Town Hall, but that would have to wait until spring. His doctor thought he needed “bracing” and advised him to go to his “native air.” He and Elizabeth left Micheldever in mid-September and spent two weeks in and around Edinburgh.

In mid-October, Sharp told J. Stanley Little, who would soon become a close and valued friend, he was incapacitated by a sudden illness. Elizabeth noticed “new disquieting symptoms” as “he began to assert himself. His heart proved to be severely affected, and his recovery was proportionately retarded” (*Memoir*, 126). Nevertheless, he returned to the life of Shelley he promised for the Great Writers Series. In late November he thanked Edward Dowden for sending as a gift his recently published two-volume *Life of Shelley*. He needed it for his writing and could not afford to buy it. As 1886 ended, Sharp had suffered varying degrees of illness for nine months, his health remained precarious, and money was in short supply

